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## Improve fire protection by studying Eastbrooke fire

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# Fire department acted properly in Eastbrooke fire

After reading the Dec. 19 letter to the editor by David Bowen ("Eastbrooke fire shows problems with fire department"), I have no alternative but to respond to his serious, yet unfounded, allegations.

I do not know Mr. Bowen, nor do I have any idea as to his background and experience with any fire department. I do know that he has no idea what actually happened the night of the Eastbrooke fire. The actual events of Dec. 7 do not show what is wrong with the Jackson Fire Department; they show what can go wrong if someone does not follow some well-established rules about fire safety.

The problems started when the owners of one of the condominiums smelled smoke. Instead of dialing 911 immediately, the owners wasted several minutes searching for the source of the smoke. Then, once they realized they needed the fire department, they made another mistake: Instead of dialing 911, one of the owners decided to first call the fire station directly, then drive to the fire station and alert firefighters in person.

It is true the station is just a short distance away, but no automobile is as fast as a radio dispatch, nor as direct. The regular phones at any fire station are just that — regular phones. The trucks respond to radio dispatches from the emergency communications center, which is where the call goes when 911 is dialed. This saves our citizens the precious time it would take to look up the phone number of their closest fire station. Additionally, when the homeowner arrived at the fire station, he went to the back door, near the garage area, instead of to the front door, near the living quarters — where there is a working doorbell. The time it took to get the firefighters' attention is time that could have been spent getting to the scene — if the homeowner had dialed 911.

Perhaps the most surprising complaint in Mr. Bowen's letter concerns the depart-

ment's efforts to save the life of an elderly resident of the complex, rather than going to the "obvious source of the fire." Human life always takes priority over bricks and furniture. Fortunately, the elderly resident was not home at the time of the fire.

Mr. Bowen writes of the "lack of coordination" at the fire scene. I have been in the fire service for more than 20 years and I have never been to a fire scene that could be described as neat and orderly. I agree that to an untrained eye it may look uncoordinated, but each unit and each individual on a unit has an assignment and nothing can be accomplished without one tremendous, coordinated effort. Of the three firefighters who initially arrived at the scene on Dec. 7, the leader has 18 years experience and the other two have 16 and 12 years of service with the department. In addition, the first commander who arrived is a veteran of 21-plus years.

Mr. Bowen's time estimates for getting water on the fire were also greatly exaggerated. We had water on the fire within 10 minutes of learning of the blaze and the entire fire was put out within two hours. If we had really not been able to put water on the fire for more than an hour, much of the complex would have burned to the ground.

The citizens of any community can play a part in helping their fire department with this effort and this was true in the Eastbrooke fire. There was a fire access or "Knox Box" at the complex, but the reason it was not used was not because the crew needed permission; the reasons were that the box was wired shut and, in the words of the maintenance worker at the complex, did not work and had proba-



**Graham**

bly never worked. Contrary to Mr. Bowen's statements, fire department crews do not have to "ask permission" from anyone to gain access to a fire scene.

Also, private complexes like Eastbrooke often relocate or reroute hydrants, so it is not uncommon for firefighters to inquire about their location. In the case of Eastbrooke, the hydrants had not been relocated, but had been repainted and landscaped to better "blend in" with the surrounding terrain. That certainly makes the area more attractive during the daytime, but it does not help firefighters' efforts to locate hydrants at night (which is why hydrants are painted white by the city). Our hydrants are checked regularly and the hydrants at Eastbrooke had been inspected in the spring of this year. Mr. Bowen is correct when he says one hydrant could have been used if someone had dug around it with a shovel. However, no fire department brings along shovels to dig out fire hydrants.

If I could say anything to Mr. Bowen, it would be that I understand how frustrating fires can be. Whether you or someone you know goes through a major home fire, it is a terrible experience. It is extremely important to any fire department that we be able to work with everyone at the scene of a fire not only to determine the cause, but to insure that each experience enhances our ability to fight future fires.

I stand by the actions of the Jackson Fire Department in this incident and by the men and women who answered the call. I also invite Mr. Bowen and other residents in the area to join with us in making our communities safer for all concerned rather than making accusations in print without knowledge of all the facts.

**Joseph N. Graham**

Fire chief  
Jackson Fire Department  
Jackson

# Improve fire protection by studying Eastbrooke fire

There are many good and dedicated people in the Jackson Fire Department, and we are grateful for their service, but even good men and women can make mistakes. In response to Chief Joseph Graham's statement in *The Clarion-Ledger* ("Fire department acted properly in Eastbrooke fire," Dec. 26), I am happy to report that my observations about the department's handling of the fire at Eastbrooke ("Eastbrooke fire shows problems with fire department," Dec. 19), based upon interviews with firemen and residents, remain unchanged and accurate.

Firemen inform me that the normal condition for a fire access box in Jackson is with a small lock through it which is to be cut by firemen in order to open gates. They indicate they carry a bolt cutter at all times for that purpose. This "Knox box," required by city ordinance and inspected by fire marshals, was fully operative and had not been "wired shut" as the chief contended.

Nor had Eastbrooke repainted or moved or camouflaged its fire hydrants, as the chief suggested. They are still painted white, though one of them had leaves and mulch accumulated so that one fireman said he could not hook a hose to the steamer valve. Other firemen tell me the trucks carry a scoop, similar to a shovel, which could have been used to clear out this minor obstacle. They also report that each truck carries a plan showing specific locations of fire hydrants, but, they report, there were so many new men working this fire, apparently part of the department's controversial rotation policy, they were not familiar with this map.

Strangely, Chief Graham continues to say the firemen may have been slow in addressing the fire because they were trying to save the life of an elderly resident. But it was in his unit that the fire began. Going in swiftly to save him was fully consistent with fighting the fire there and preventing its spread.

The resident who first discovered the fire tried to call 911 to alert the fire department, but his phone line had been burned through. He took the appropriate alternative in going to the fire station 100 yards away, where he had some difficulty in gaining the attention of firemen.

Let us all hope that we can learn from situations such as this to help determine how Jackson might do a better job of providing fire protection in the future.

**David Bowen**  
Jackson